

Opening Remarks at the
IDRC Speaker Series Presentation by
His Excellency Ricardo Lagos

8th Floor, IDRC
18h30 – 20h
December 3, 2007

Maureen O'Neil
President, International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

Good evening. I am Maureen O'Neil, the President of the International Development Research Centre. It is my great pleasure to welcome you to another instalment in our Speaker Series.

[We are particularly pleased this evening to have with us the Honourable Beverley Oda, Member of Parliament for Durham, Ontario, and Minister for International Cooperation. Please join me in welcoming Minister Oda.]

Les Conférences du CRDI sont une tribune où des sommités mondiales exposent des points de vue inédits sur des questions de justice sociale et de développement international. Les conférences de cette année ont pour thème le façonnement de la démocratie dans les pays en développement. En octobre, nous avons eu le plaisir d'entendre Rory Stewart, diplomate, auteur et aventurier, nous parler du développement démocratique en Afghanistan. En novembre, nous avons organisé une table ronde réunissant des journalistes de pays en développement qui ont dû composer avec l'apartheid, la tyrannie, la censure, la corruption et d'autres ennemis de la démocratie.

Nous poursuivons dans cette veine aujourd'hui. Ce matin et cet après-midi, j'ai eu le privilège de participer, ici au CRDI, à une fascinante table ronde sur les façons de favoriser la démocratie. En effet, des politiciens, des universitaires et des experts du développement ont pris part à une réflexion sur les manières dont les bailleurs de fonds, dont le CRDI, contribuent à l'essor d'institutions démocratiques ou, plutôt, y nuisent.

Among the participants at this roundtable were several eminent persons from the developing world who know well the practical side of the struggle for democracy — because they themselves have been personally involved in that struggle. Often, these people have fought to establish democratic values in the face of brutal and authoritarian governments.

One of these eminent democrats is this evening's guest speaker. With the generous collaboration of the Embassy of Chile, we are pleased to present the former President of Chile — and an IDRC research partner and grant recipient at the outset of his career — His Excellency Ricardo Lagos.

Trained in law and economics, Sr. Lagos early in life took up academic positions in the United States and in Chile. During the government of Salvador Allende, he held several posts with agencies of the United Nations, including serving as Chile's delegate to the UN General Assembly. Soon after the Pinochet coup in 1973, however, he and his family were exiled from his home country – along with some 3,000 other social scientists.

In the late 1970s, he returned to Chile where he continued to serve the United Nations as an international civil servant. It was during this same period that IDRC began an unprecedented program of support to research institutions in Chile, providing an intellectual haven to researchers who were determined to continue their work in the face of growing repression and personal intimidation.

It was in the 1980s that Sr. Lagos he launched his career as a dissident and working politician, when he became one of the brave leaders of the democratic opposition to General Pinochet.

His leadership of this opposition was solidified during the run-up to the 1988 plebiscite on whether Pinochet should be allowed to remain president of Chile. Sr. Lagos and other critics of the dictatorship called on the Chilean people to vote NO. Famously — and courageously — he appeared on Chilean television to raise his finger and directly accuse Pinochet of dishonesty and of being power hungry, and to criticize him for “years of torture, murder, and human rights violations.”

As we know, Pinochet's defeat in the plebiscite led to a gradual transition to democracy. And the people of Chile still remember the “Lagos finger.”

Sr. Lagos served as cabinet minister in the centre-left governments that followed the departure of Pinochet. During this period, Canada and Chile negotiated a free trade agreement which came into effect ten years ago. In January 2000, Sr. Lagos himself was elected President of Chile — the country's first socialist leader since Allende.

During his six-year term, his government negotiated other important trade deals; created new unemployment insurance, health, housing, and education programs; and improved Chile's infrastructure. And — significantly for those concerned with democracy and justice — his government appointed the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture, headed by Bishop Sergio Valech.

On leaving office, Sr. Lagos established the Democracy and Development Foundation. He is also president of the Madrid Club, a forum of former presidents and heads of government committed to the promotion of democracy. This past May, he was appointed as a Special Envoy on Climate Change by United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

And now, as part of our continuing exploration of issues of democratic development, please join me in welcoming His Excellency Ricardo Lagos. After his talk, we will have time for a question-and-answer session. Please note that tonight's event will also be available as a podcast on IDRC's website.

I am pleased to turn the lectern over to you, Sr. Lagos ... À vous, M. Lagos.

[Sr. Lagos speaks]

Thank you, Sr. Lagos. Now Sr. Lagos will be happy to take questions from the floor. If you have a question, please step up to the floor microphones.

[Q&A session]

[Informal, closing words of thanks, to Minister Oda, the Embassy of Chile, to Sr. Lagos, and to the audience]